

Institution: Newcastle University
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: <i>Red Dust Road: New forms of memoir and the enrichment and extension of public discourse on family, identity, belonging and adoption</i>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor Jackie Kay's memoir <i>Red Dust Road</i> (2010), her account of growing up black in Glasgow, the adopted daughter of white parents, and her search for her birth parents, challenges and extends public discourse on identity, family and belonging, using memoir to explore the complexities and emotional resonances of the difficult issues raised. Responses to the work point to its significant on-going impact in civil society on the understanding of adoption, including transracial adoption, and how society defines family. Its impact can be judged by the media coverage received and its widespread use in the public sphere in discussions of issues of identity, adoption and family. Its reach is evidenced through the number, range and popularity of Kay's readings as well as the book's sales and its reception within groups not traditionally thought of as typical audiences for literary memoir.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Jackie Kay MBE was Northern Arts Literary Fellow in the School of English at Newcastle from 2002-04, appointed to a senior lectureship in 2004 and promoted to a personal chair in 2006. From her influential poetry collection <i>The Adoption Papers</i> (1991) onwards, her writing has investigated complex issues around identity, and probed the power of stories and storytelling to reveal and transform lives. Several poems on this subject appeared in her 2005 collection <i>Life Mask</i> (1). <i>Red Dust Road</i> (2), published in 2010, and the companion poetry collection <i>Fiere</i> (3), published in 2011, extend these explorations to book length. Kay has been widely praised for the warmth, humanity and compassion with which she treats difficult material, and the effectiveness with which she communicates with her audiences.</p> <p>The development in <i>Red Dust Road</i> of themes already present in Kay's work was based on a lengthy process of personal and scholarly research. The research began with a 2002 trip to Nigeria to meet her birth father, as recorded in a number of the poems in <i>Life Mask</i>. In 2009, she undertook a second trip with fellow writer, and PhD student from the School of English, Kachi Ozumba. Together they identified and visited the ancestral village of Kay's birth father, the journey to which forms an important narrative thread in <i>Red Dust Road</i>. The School of English at Newcastle played a critical role in supporting these trips, helping with organisation and funding Ozumba's costs. Using his network of personal and family contacts, Ozumba enabled Kay securely to take the long road-trip across Nigeria, to experience the Igbo culture of her birth father's town, and to make contact with her birth father's other children.</p> <p>Kay's writing has developed the memoir form in both prose and verse, using fiction as a technique and taking the importance of stories as a central theme. She has moved away from notions of essentialised identity to explore the recognitions and connections between people that the exchange of stories makes possible. Memoir is used by Kay to challenge some of the assumptions of the genre: the paradigmatic journey of discovery in her version produces unexpected results and can never be <i>the</i> story of origins. Stories are instead presented as plural, unforeseeable and ongoing, and always involve transactions with others. Kay's explorations through memoir are also exploration <i>of</i> memoir. They propel interpretations of identity and its representation in new directions, and have been praised for transforming the memoir genre. Bernardine Evaristo, for example, commended the 'novelistic and poetic flair' of <i>Red Dust Road</i>, in which 'characters come alive with pitch-perfect speech, language is lyrically and imaginatively rendered, there is page-turning suspense' and 'even the structure defies expectation, criss-crossing the decades back and forth, from Kay's childhood voice through to middle-age.' Both the artistic success and societal impact of Kay's writing has been recognised by multiple awards and accolades. <i>Life Mask</i> was a Poetry Book Society recommendation in 2005, and in 2011-12, <i>Red Dust Road</i> was Scottish Book of the Year, London Book of the Year, and was shortlisted for numerous other prizes. Following its publication Kay received honorary doctorates from Caledonian University and the Royal Society of Music and Drama in Scotland.</p>

3. References to the research

- (1) Jackie Kay, *Life Mask* (Tarsest: Bloodaxe, 2005). ISBN 185224691X. Available from HEI on request.
- (2) Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (London: Picador, 2010). ISBN 978-0330451055. REF2 output: 168802.
Audio version narrated by Jackie Kay for RNIB (London: Picador, 2011). ISBN 978-0330451062. Audiobook version read by Jackie Kay (Rearsby: Whole Story Audiobooks, 2011). ISBN: 978-1407488486. Abridged and serialised as BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week, 19-23 July 2010, read by Jackie Kay.
- (3) Jackie Kay, *Fiere* (London: Picador, 2011). ISBN: 0330513370. REF2 output: 168803.

4. Details of the impact

Life Mask, *Fiere* and, in particular, *Red Dust Road* have had a significant impact on public discourse and policy debate surrounding adoption and identity and related issues, as well as on individual readers. They have also had impact in the education of both social workers at HEIs beyond the submitting institution and children at primary and secondary level. As a book that is supremely 'readable', *Red Dust Road* is recommended on reading lists on adoption websites and has provoked discussion of its major themes in reading groups worldwide. Kay has frequently discussed her work and the issues it raises in print, in person and as a broadcaster. She has also worked with a large and diverse selection of community groups – including many that are marginalised or hard to reach – engaging in dialogue, and discussing the implications of her work.

Enhancing public and professional understanding, and intervening in policy debate

Kay's poetry and memoir, and the associated outreach and media work she has undertaken, have contributed appreciably to public discourse surrounding issues of identity and adoption. Her work brings complexity to the topic of transracial adoption; she refuses to be co-opted to support a single position. Between 2008 and 2013, Kay appeared 16 times on BBC national radio to talk about her work and the issues it raises, on programmes as diverse as 'Front Row' (discussing *Fiere*: BBC Radio 4, 11 Jan. 2011), and 'The House I Grew up In' (discussing her childhood: BBC Radio 7, 9 Dec. 2010). Often she engaged directly with policy makers, as for instance in an appearance on BBC Radio Four's 'Woman's Hour' (9 March 2012) in which Kay discussed trans-racial adoption with presenter Jenni Murray, Tim Lawton MP (then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families) and Shama Sutar-Smith, Senior Policy Officer for the London Borough of Camden. The programme was broadcast to 4 million listeners. Discussing adoption in her advice column in *The Guardian*, Mariella Frostrup argued that, in her 'brilliant *Red Dust Road*', Kay's 'description of being a mixed-race child in a white Scottish Marxist home offers a compelling argument for opening our homes to similarly abandoned children' and 'makes a strong case for the benefits to all concerned of looking beyond our own biology for children to raise' (**IMP1**). *Red Dust Road* is a featured resource on almost all major adoption websites, including for example, the 'Social Care Online' resource on the Social Care Institute for Excellence website which provides the most authoritative list of social care resources in the UK (**IMP2**), and the website of Pact, a US adoption agency for children of colour. Reviewing the book, Susan Ito, Director of the Pact Family Camp, called *Red Dust Road* 'the best adoption memoir I have ever read' (**IMP3**). The international importance of her contribution to debates on adoption has resulted in her being invited as a keynote speaker at the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture (ASAC) in 2014.

Impact on individuals

Kay's work has had direct impact on individuals affected by adoption. Adoptive parent Sally Donovan, typical of many, blogged, 'I would urge anyone who is touched by adoption to read Jackie Kay's book'. In the US, Susan Ito wrote that 'As an adult adoptee, reading this memoir made me feel more understood and seen than almost any other.' (**IMP3**). One adoptee contacted Kay to tell her that *Red Dust Road* had given her the courage to journey to Africa herself to trace a birth parent. The responses of dozens of reading groups to Kay's work are recorded online. Typical is that of The Berlin Intercultural Reading Group: '*Red Dust Road* opened up fascinating discussions around adoption. Kay questions things many of us might take for granted: assumptions about love and family - and the right to know our parents... Our discussions included personal dilemmas and experiences' (**IMP4**). Kay's own half-sisters discovered their relationship to Kay

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through a *Guardian* podcast of extracts of the memoir, and subsequently contacted Kay at Newcastle University. *Red Dust Road* is powerful in being able to affect highly personal outcomes while also speaking to wider themes, because, as Bernadine Evaristo put it, it 'opens up the conversation around adoption beyond Kay's personal narrative' (**IMP1**). For Aminatta Forna, *Red Dust Road* tells 'the story of every person of colour who grew up in Britain, of being told you don't belong' (**IMP1**). The power of Kay's poetry to help people to explore the issues of family and belonging has also been widely recognised. Four of Kay's poems from *Life Mask* were republished in an anthology called *In Search of Belonging: Reflections by Transracially Adopted People* (2006), published by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. Kay's work has the ability to be both very personal and to speak to others, who can read their own stories in hers.

Impact through education

Kay's work appears on a growing number of school reading lists. From 2012 her autobiographical poetry has been on the Scottish Qualifications Authority's 'Set Scottish Texts' list for National 5. *Red Dust Road* has been selected by individual teachers in Scottish schools as the set non-fiction text for Highers classes. It is on the prescribed reading list for the Leaving Certificate in English in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, *Red Dust Road* appears on teacher training curricula. Following a workshop Kay conducted for PGDipEd (QTS) students and school children in the Department of Education at Birmingham University, for example, lecturer Dr Kay Fuller wrote that she had no doubt the trainee teachers would go on 'to use Jackie Kay's poetry and autobiography in their school teaching as a result of her visit to the school' (**IMP5**). Kay has lectured on *Red Dust Road* on a number of occasions to audiences of social workers, for instance at the University of Central Lancashire (16 May 2012), turning engagement based on the text into professional learning.

Extending public discourse and enriching lives

By 31 July 2013 *Red Dust Road* had sold 11,090 copies hardback, 15,896 paperback 1,445 e-book, making 28,431 copies in all. Kay has extended public discourse on issues of family, identity, belonging and adoption much further by taking part in frequent public events in relation to *Red Dust Road* and *Fiere*. The estimated audiences for these events is in excess of 15,000. Attendees value these experiences very highly. Kay has been a major draw at literary festivals including Edinburgh (650 people), Cheltenham, London, Dublin, Manchester, Birmingham, Ilkley and Lichfield (where *Red Dust Road* was chosen as the 'Big Read' and 200 copies distributed free). At the Latitude Music Festival in 2010 Kay gave a reading to over 2000 people. Internationally, Kay has given readings from *Red Dust Road* and led debate on this issues it raises in many countries, including at the Paraty Literary Festival, Brazil (2011), the Sydney Writers' Festival (2013), at which she was interviewed for ABC radio, and in New Zealand. She has frequently been invited to speak at universities and colleges beyond the submitting institution, including giving the 2010 Richard Hoggart Lecture at Goldsmiths University and the Amnesty Annual Lecture at the Edinburgh International Book Festival on 'Poetry and the Fight for Human Rights' (2013). Other organisations for which she has given readings include Oxfam, the Glasgow Women's Library, the Freud Museum, and numerous independent bookshops.

In March 2013, *Red Dust Road* was selected by members of the book group of the international women's rights charity Womankind as their International Women's Day book, and Kay answered questions online (**IMP6**). On World Book Night (23 April 2013), having been voted for by the public and selected by the editorial committee, *Red Dust Road* was one of the twenty titles given away to 500,000 people 'who don't regularly read', especially those 'in prisons, care homes, hospitals, sheltered, supported and social housing [and] the homeless'. Julia Kingsford, World Book Night Chief Executive, has written that *Red Dust Road* was 'a great choice for World Book Night', noting that many of the 20,000 volunteers on the scheme 'are choosing to give it to adults and teens who share some life experiences with Jackie' but that 'regardless of ... backgrounds, it is a great, great book, over-brimming with hope and love' (**IMP7**).

Impact on marginalised communities

Kay works with marginalised and hard-to-reach groups directly, and her writing has achieved substantial significance in the lives of many people from these constituencies. For example, in 2012 Kay worked with the Reader Organisation's Reading In Secure Environments (RISE)

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programme at HMP Holloway and HMP Styal, reading from *Red Dust Road*. Testimony from those present indicates the impact Kay had on inmates: ‘Afterwards the buzz in the room is palpable, it’s the excited, purposeful chatter of people talking to each other about what they’ve just been part of, fifty people talking about great writing. Many gather round Jackie to congratulate her, ask more questions, grab a book or just shake her hand. One woman sidles up to me and says that the event was “beautifully inspiring”, another looks up and simply says “She understands, that Jackie, she really knows” (IMP8). Poems from *Fiere* have also been used in the RISE programme. Greater Manchester Mental Health Trust’s reader-in-residence Damien Taylor, for example, has found that the poems have particular resonances with female inmates (IMP8). Kay’s most recent poems (March 2013) have been inspired by meetings with asylum seekers in Scotland and were written specifically for the Scottish Refugee Council’s ‘Stop Destitution’ campaign (IMP9). As noted in *The Scotsman on Sunday* article: “Kay is a strong believer in the power of the written word, believing that writing a poem that moves the reader can make a difference. ‘Auden said, “Poetry makes nothing happen,” but your wish as a poet is that it should make something happen. I believe in the power of words, and for me my words are actions, so the two are not mutually exclusive. It’s a way of making a contribution’ (IMP10). In other words, Kay designs her writing to achieve impact.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- IMP1** Collation of newspaper coverage of *Red Dust Road* (reviews, comment, blogs, etc.).
- IMP2** ‘Social Care Online’, Social Care Institute for Excellence. Available at: <http://www.scie-socialcareonline.org.uk/>.
- IMP3** Susan Ito, ‘Two Stories of Reunion’, *PACT’s Point of View. The Newsletter for Adoptive Families with Children of Color*, 2011, and <http://store.pactadopt.org/Transracial-and-Transnational-Adoption-Books-for-Adults.html>.
- IMP4** Summary and transcript. Berlin Intercultural Reading Group on *Red Dust Road*, 10-22 June 2011.
- IMP5** Dr Kay Fuller, Lecturer in English Education, University of Birmingham. Testimonial letter, 30 October 2013
- IMP6** Womankind Worldwide Book Group, March 2013. Available at: <http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1241576-march-2013-red-dust-road-by-jackie-kay>.
- IMP7** Julia Kingsford, ‘Red Dust Road’, World Book Night UK and Ireland website. Available at: <http://www.worldbooknight.org/books/item/10017-red-dust-road>.
- IMP8** Reader Organisation blog: ‘Jackie Kay at HMP Styal’, Reading in Secure Environments blog, 2 November 2012. Available at: <http://risereader.org.uk/2012/11/02/jackie-kay-at-hmp-styal/> and “Featured Poem: Woman at a Window by Jackie Kay”, 8 October 2012. Available at: <http://thereaderonline.co.uk/2012/10/08/featured-poem-woman-at-a-window-by-jackie-kay/>.
- IMP9** Scottish Refugee Council: ‘Writing for Refugee Women’, 2013. Available at: <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/jackiekay>.
- IMP10** Janet Christie, ‘Jackie Kay, using poetry to help female asylum seekers’, *The Scotsman on Sunday*, 10 March 2013. Available at: <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/jackie-kay-using-poetry-to-help-female-asylum-seekers-1-2828428>.

Copies of all documents can be supplied on request